PHOTOGRAPHY AND SEPTEMBER 11TH

Spectacle, Memory, Trauma

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1 SPECTACLE AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

A journalist asked me, isn't this propaganda? I told him, propaganda for what?[1]

It is now no longer the taboo it once was to describe the September 11th attacks as spectacular. They were designed to do as much damage to America on a symbolic level as on the level of material destruction and death. It is also now widely accepted that as an act of spectacular terrorism, this was destined, if not deliberately planned, to be the first move in an enduring war of images. In this sense, it was, according to one especially daring *Washington Post* reporter, 'a masterpiece'.[2] My subject here is not this symbolic manoeuvre itself, but the victims' backlash. What agendas, constraints, tropes and modes of address characterized the visual representation of the attacks in the American media, and why? Has the United States' position within the image war been strengthened or compromised by its response? What journalistic conventions were broken or adhered to in this process, and what were the implications? Lower Manhattan was filled with cameras on that day. Professional and amateur photographers in their thousands created a record more comprehensive than that of any other public event in history. And, this supply was equally met by demand. The following day's newspapers were taken over by photography, with text largely relegated to margins and captions. Photo editors faced an unusual problem – instead of struggling to find the right pictures, they struggled to fit all the pictures in, in many cases responding by creating special editions and photographic supplements in which words could be dispensed with almost completely. Barbie Zelizer has argued that the American media's photographic presentation of the attacks was 'dazzling', and that the sidelining of words that was associated with this had political consequences. Critical questions about what had led to the attacks, their possible prevention and the nature of the Bush administration's immediate response and subsequent military action were deflected by means of a spectacular image overload.[3] While the deliberate hiding of particular images from public view may

indeed have been an issue, a more fundamental problem was the disabling of public critical engagement by an abundance of images that did not reveal the whole truth but seemed to satisfy by their sheer volume and impact. This dazzling effect operated on two levels. The first was the immediate photographic news coverage that took place in the days following the attacks: the high-pressure editorial decisions regarding what, and how much, to publish of the first visual details at the World Trade Center and Pentagon sites. This early stage could be called, in the pseudo-military terminology of an image war, defensive. Then, as well as documentation of the slower processes of recovery and response, later stages involved more calculated uses of photographic imagery for propaganda purposes: carefully orchestrated PR appearances by political figures at the site, for example, and perhaps most striking of all, the US Department of State's touring photographic exhibition, *After September 11: Images from Ground Zero*.

Though television was the medium that first broke the news of the September 11th attacks to American and international audiences, our subject here is the printed press.[4] One reason for this focus is that, due to the dangers of close-range filming and the difficulties of transmission, most of the video coverage of Lower Manhattan that day was gathered by news teams positioned at high vantage points on buildings that were a safe distance away from the World Trade Center. This, and the unprecedented decision quickly made by news networks to share footage, means that most of the early moving images seen around the world were essentially the same wide-angle, long-range views, repeated over and over again. Still photography, on the other hand, provided much greater diversity and detail. The pictures that made it into the following day's newspapers via the Associated Press, Reuters and other agencies not only framed the burning towers from a frontal, bird's eye perspective but also from myriad positions on the streets below. Photographers were able to capture the unfolding human drama as well as the big picture, in some cases having to negotiate risks to their own safety and inhaling the same dust and smoke as their subjects. Further, in keeping with, but also somewhat crippled by, television's special role as the medium best equipped to relay breaking news in real time, TV news networks were able to present only what their live cameras were taking in minute by minute, in many cases struggling to comprehend what they were seeing even as they were broadcasting it. The printed press, on the other hand, had at least a little time to make decisions about its picturing of the events.[5]

The appetite for printed news in America in the aftermath of September 11th was so huge that before long, as well as reporting the unfolding story, newspaper editors realized that they themselves were becoming part of the story. This event called for unprecedented decisions to be made regarding editorial content, distribution and print volume. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported on 13 September, at least 100 newspapers published 'extra editions' on the Tuesday afternoon, with front page headlines declaring, 'TERROR', 'OUTRAGE', 'DAY

OF EVIL' and 'BASTARDS!' in much larger-than-usual type.[6] The same article reports that on Wednesday morning, the *Los Angeles Times* itself had printed 180,000 more copies than usual, and 50,000 more by noon. The *New York Times* printed 450,000 extra on Wednesday, approximately doubling its usual print run, and spokesmen said there would be an expected 900,000 further copies on Thursday. *TIME*, America's largest weekly news magazine, posted stories and pictures from a special 40-page 'memorial' edition on its website on Wednesday evening, expecting to publish seven million copies by the end of Thursday, and *Newsweek* also quickly produced two million copies of a 64-page special edition that contained no advertising.[7] On its now famous 'US attacked' cover, the *New York Times* featured an extra-large typeface used only twice previously by the paper, for the first manned moon landing and the resignation of Richard Nixon. The *Chicago Tribune* (which initially increased its press run by 15 per cent and by Thursday had printed another 900,000 extra copies) remarked that the nation's newspapers presented widely varying tones, or 'more personality' when compared to the relatively homogenous coverage provided by television news. This was, it said, 'a reflection of papers' traditional role as records not only of the moment, but historical markers destined to be keepsakes'.[8]

Despite this perceived diversity, however, a close look at how newspapers used photographs during these first few days reveals that the range of views represented is in fact very narrow. In her own survey of the attacks' printed press coverage, Zelizer has identified four prevailing categories of photograph.[9] Three of these are photographs showing the towers' ruins being observed by witnesses (usually uniformed rescue workers or other figures of authority), those showing witnesses watching as the attacks unfold, but not showing the scene itself (as in Figure I.1) and images of people looking at photographs or taking photographs. The first and most prominent category, however, consists of images of the World Trade Center towers themselves during or just after the impact of the second plane. Included in this category is Spencer Platt's view shown in Figure 1.1, and the photograph taken by Steve Ludlum that appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* the following day. Ludlum's picture provides a wide-angle view showing the intact Brooklyn Bridge in the foreground and the exploding twin towers surrounded by the other (as yet) undamaged buildings of the financial district. John Loengard, former director of photography at *LIFE* magazine, offers his opinion of why this image was chosen for the *Times* front page, saying that it 'put the event in a context – human habitation, the size of the city – whereas many of the others were focussed directly on the towers'.[10] It is perhaps significant that the paper chose to lead with a photograph in which the scale of the catastrophe is clear but is set within a larger context of relative normality. This is in contrast to *TIME* magazine's commemorative cover, featuring a photograph by Lyle Oweko that shows the exploding towers in dramatic foreshortened isolation, evoking not steadfastness, but epic, almost

Figure 1.1 Hijacked United Airlines Flight 175 crashes into the South Tower of the World Trade Center 9.03 a.m. September 11th 2001. Photo by Spencer Platt, Getty Images.

Figure 1.2 Workers watch a giant screen in Martin Place, Sydney, 12 September 2001, showing images of the twin towers of the World Trade Center after they were hit by two hijacked passenger jets. Photo by Greg Wood, AFP/Getty Images.

cinematic destruction. These and other views of the towers were by far the most common choice for the front pages of papers around the country, and they continued to appear long after the rubble was cleared. The *New York Times*, whose front page featured not one, but five photographs of varying sizes, has become invested with historical meaning as a commemorative object in itself, as the *Chicago Tribune* predicted many papers would. The context of the action shown in Ludlum's dominant image is illustrated by four supplementary views: United Airlines Flight 175 before impact with the south tower (forming a kind of inverted 'before and after'), firefighters in the towers' wreckage, the scene of the Pentagon attack and a wounded female victim receiving first aid near the World Trade Center site – a relatively graphic illustration of actual bodily injury that proved very rare in the American press from this point onwards.

Another unconventional photojournalistic trope, and one that is associated with Zelizer's category of pictures that show people looking at pictures, is pictures of people looking at screens.[11] Appearing frequently in newspapers far beyond New York and Washington are a notable number of photographs of people looking at footage of the attacks on screens, often in public places and in groups (Figure 1.2). Further illustrating the nationwide and international impact of the event, it is again not the attack itself that is the 'news' signified by these images, but the act of watching, particularly when this watching is a collective activity and one that marks an exception to people's usual habits of news consumption. Photographs of photographs and photographs of screens all involve a layering of refracted gazes, each layer redoubling the burden of spectacle. So heavy was this burden – the imperative not only to bear witness to the devastation of the buildings but to the devastation of other witnesses – that it seemed to create the need for a further category, in which figures of authority appear in the frame looking along with us and on our behalf. From around 15 September, photographs and footage began to appear of political leaders arriving to observe for themselves the scene in Lower Manhattan. The *New York Times* ran a large picture of President Bush and other officials at Ground Zero with the caption, 'President Bush surveyed what looked like a war zone yesterday at the World Trade Center site. Representative Jerold Nadler, Governor Pataki and Mayor Giuliani accompanied him.'[12] The authority of these witnesses can be seen, Zelizer says, as a symbolic invitation, providing a prompt for viewers in their own reactions. These pictures are used, again, not only because of their inherent newsworthiness, but as representative signals of appropriate response. She identifies this particular convention as beginning with the photographic coverage of the liberation of Nazi death camps in 1945, when General Eisenhower and other Allied leaders were brought to the camps to be photographed looking, along with the rest of the world, at the horrors that had been uncovered there.[13] This, she argues, was for international audiences a historical moment of such disorientating atrocity that it essentially called for a demonstration of how to

Figure 1.3 U.S. President George W. Bush speaks to rescue workers, firefighters and police officers from the rubble of Ground Zero, 14 September 2001. Standing with Bush is retired firefighter Bob Beckwith and New York Governor George Pataki. Photo by Eric Draper, White House/Getty Images.

see. In this moment, looking was so serious an undertaking that it had to be modelled and led by society's chief witnesses. Of all the post–September 11th photographs consistent with this function, the one shown in Figure 1.3 was the most widely circulated. Mark McKinnon, George W. Bush's media advisor, somewhat optimistically describes the picture of the president atop the 'pile' at Ground Zero with retired firefighter Bob Beckwith as 'the most lasting and iconic image of [his] presidency. It is much like President Reagan's call in Berlin to "tear down this wall," except this moment was unscripted and an antecedent to war, which makes it even more powerful.'[14] Other political and media figures disagree on the point of the image's spontaneity, but not on its value to the president's P.R. The photo opportunity was not only perfectly realized, but essential, says Luc Sante, cultural critic and historian of photography: 'People wanted to see him climbing on top of something [down there] … Even if the calculation was done five minutes ahead of time, it was calculated. I'm positive of it. [It was] part of an image-management strategy that's characterised this administration from the beginning.'[15] And, there can be no doubt that it is, for these purposes, a perfect photograph. The president stands as the uppermost figure in the scene and is the sole focus of the crowd, whom he addresses through a loud haler. But, his body language self-consciously shifts attention on to Beckwith, who by contrast stands, feet planted wide apart, hands on hips and gaze aloft, as the real hero of the moment. This status is reinforced by his age (seventy-nine) and also by the gas-mask-like apparatus worn around his neck, both of which implicitly identify him with the 'greatest generation' and lend this moment something of the glory attributed to America's involvement in the Second World War. But, instead of a uniform, Beckwith is dressed in the scruffy jeans and sweatshirt of the American everyman, and so he is also an archetype of the civilian heroism that has already come to characterize this episode in New York's history. Bush picks out this American hero, elevates him for all to see and then stands reflected in his eminence, identifying himself as the champion of all that Beckwith represents. But, in case the symbol of a hero who is part civilian and part officer is too ambiguous (Beckwith is not just a firefighter, he is a 'veteran' firefighter), the group is flanked in the foreground by a uniformed FDNY official on the left and a police officer on the right, both mirroring one another's solemn pose and facial expression and adding further emphasis to the gravitas of the moment.

Alongside the repetitive scenes of rubble, smoke, rescue workers, heroes and watchers, though, there was an overwhelming absence. In the thousands of photographs that circulated within the public sphere in the week following the attacks, death was everywhere implied, but invisible. The closest that most newspaper editors came to showing dead bodies was in the 'jumper' photographs. Images of falling victims – a sight that for many eyewitnesses was the defining horror of the day – appeared in a handful of papers around the country within twenty-four hours of the attacks but then quickly disappeared

from view. Their place was taken by symbols: architectural destruction without any visible trace of the people inside; the streets of Lower Manhattan covered with ad-hoc memorial paraphernalia, crosses and photographs of missing victims; tokens of the invisible dead. A very rare exception, appearing in the *Los Angeles Times* on 14 September, was a large photograph of rescue workers holding a body bag on a stretcher above their heads. The caption reads: 'A victim of the WTC disaster is carried out of the rubble in a body bag, one of 30,000 ordered by city officials as the grim collection of corpses continues.' But the body itself is not visible.[16]

A *New York Times* article on 13 September discussed the dilemma faced by pictures' desks in those chaotic days, regarding what to publish and what to shield from public view. It observed that 'not since the Oklahoma bombing or the crash of a helicopter in Mogadishu, Somalia, have newspaper editors and television producers had so many images available that show the graphic deaths and dismemberments of Americans'.[17] But, several factors were at play in the editorial decisions that had to be made about these pictures. Some, like Erik Sorenson, president and general manager of MSNBC, asked the question, 'when does realistic coverage of a tragedy cross the line into exploitation?' arguing that 'there were plenty of images that told the story without all of the gore'.[18] In the same article, David Westin, president of ABC News, put it a different way: 'the question is, are we informing or titillating and causing unnecessary grief? Our responsibility is to inform the American public of what's going on and, in going the next step, is it necessary to show people plunging to their death?'[19] Conversely, Ed Kosner, editor in chief of *New York Daily News*, who had caused controversy in the first few days with his decision to print a photo of a severed hand, argued, 'you can't do the story without doing the story. It's no time to be squeamish'.[20]

Commonly accepted standards of taste are the most obvious explanation for the invisibility of human destruction in this instance. There would arguably have been little point in causing further distress at such a delicate time, particularly given the very real risk of family members recognizing the remains of loved ones, perhaps even before being notified of their deaths. The convention of picturing architectural wreckage or other signifiers such as lighted candles, blood splatters, strewn items of clothing and personal effects rather than human remains ensures impact without distaste. In the British and American press, unlike that of other parts of the world, it is usual practice to picture a scene of death only after the bodies are out of sight. Most of the horror of these images lies in imagining either what has gone before or what is outside the frame. These images can be metaphorical or even beautiful, suiting a sombre mood rather than illustrating the full impact of 'reality'. This practice could be called euphemistic, implying manipulation or dishonesty, and yet it is sometimes difficult to discern between the dishonest and the considerate. It is also difficult to discern between common decency in the face of grief and manipulation for questionable political ends. That

is what makes any detached critical study of this subject both very important and very sensitive. This fine line was negotiated by newsrooms and press offices all over the world in the aftermath of September 11th. In an article titled 'Brokering the Power of the Image', James Kelly, managing editor of *TIME* magazine, reflects on his publication's history in recording the horrors of war, claiming that 'times have changed' since the days when official censorship was what made war fatalities invisible. He discusses the ethical wrestling involved in deciding what to show and what to hold back, and his comments reveal his adherence to the American mainstream press convention of occasionally printing photographs of dead foreigners, but almost never Americans, and certainly never white Americans:

> It is also undeniable that the task of deciding what photos to run in *TIME* has grown much more difficult in the wake of September 11th. In putting together our special issue on the World Trade Center attacks, I considered whether we should use photographs of the many victims who jumped out of windows rather than stay behind and be burned to death … I'm not saying that one decision is right and the other wrong but only that my sensibility led me to pick one over the other.[21]

Kelly's comments highlight two points. First, that September 11th changed photojournalism, and second, the issue of exactly what it is that prompts the decision to print or hide a dead body. For Kelly, it was 'sensibility'. For others, the criteria may have been different.

Zelizer identifies an uncritical acceptance of invisibility in the aftermath of September 11th, suggesting that American society has been complacent about 'seeing less when we should see more'.[22] The main reason for this, she says, is that so little information was made to look like so much, and that the images shown were generally not complex or multi-layered, but easily readable and easily slotted into the pervading interpretive schema. The ubiquity of such images, which Zelizer calls 'pure surfaces', created the illusion of masses of information and infinite visibility, when in fact these huge numbers of photographs were all variations on the same narrow set of themes. Which images were being pushed aside in this deluge? Is it simply the invisibility of bodies and gore that is at issue here? How dangerous or destructive could this invisibility really be? John Taylor, in his book *Body Horror*, equates the absence of horror in the representation of real events, however sensitive, with a 'dangerous poverty of knowledge'.[23] He concludes that if the press has a responsibility to show horror more graphically than it does, this is because of the importance of bearing witness; a debt owed to the dead or suffering to ensure that society learns something and that such a thing cannot happen again. Bearing witness, he argues, is an act of cultivating historical memory: an appropriate sense of things as they happened. The

responsibility of the media is to mark out and present events with honesty, and the decision not to show unpleasant details robs the public of the opportunity to bear witness.[24] Taylor seems to be suggesting that the press should be responsible for the deliberate shaping of public memory and for creating a space within which people can appropriately witness, as well as for deciding what is appropriate. The potential for ideological influence seems to lie, for him, in the decision to hide particular pictures. For Susan Sontag, on the other hand, any kind of deliberately cultivated 'public' or 'collective memory' at all, whether or not it is graphic in its presentation of horror, constitutes a dangerous ideology, and this is an inevitable outcome whenever institutions assume control of sets of images:

> All memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds. Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts [and] feelings.[25]

It is tempting to make generalizations about the political and social factors at play in the control of the visual representation of September 11th. Why, from the state's point of view, was it not in the national interest to see the bodies of victims of September 11th? Wouldn't the heightened outrage have cemented support for retaliation? The ideological motivations and power of the Bush administration were surely implicated, as was the media's compulsion to cooperate with them, particularly as the days and weeks went by and the transition was made from initial knee-jerk reportage to a period of 'making sense', followed by commemoration. It would also be easy to overstate the passivity of the audience at whom this representation was aimed, within and outside the United States. It is on this point that Theodor Adorno's critique of 'the culture industry' presents a useful model. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry is constituted by the complex and often fluid relationship between ruling ideology, mass media and society and is characterized by the direct control of populations through the manipulation of their desires. This seems to be an ideal framework for the analysis of American culture at this time, when the political administration had such a vested interest in the emotional state of the nation, and the threatened population in turn looked to both government and media for reassurance with an urgency rarely seen before or since. There is a proviso, however, that in his writing on this subject, Adorno can be accused of a certain amount of generalization when it comes to the definitions of the 'ruling ideology'. Those referred to in his work 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' as 'the people at the

top', who possess a 'violent monopoly over cultural life', are never identified in very specific detail.[26] In common with his contemporaries within the Frankfurt School, an underlying motivation for much of Adorno's work was to understand the roots of fascism: what the workings of the culture industry might reveal about this extreme ideology, and how such an ideology could possibly have taken hold of a civilized society in the way that it did in 1930s' Europe.[27] While by no means analogous, early twenty-first-century America was also a society gripped by uncertainty, suspicion and conflict, in which what might be called the 'visual culture industry' had a relationship to dominant socio-political forces that warrants a similar kind of attention. Another proviso, however, is that along with the wider Frankfurt School at the point of their writing, Adorno and Horkheimer's concern with culture and subjectivity in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (in which Adorno's 'Culture Industry' essay appears) is somewhat detached from the concrete politics of the day, and in particular from the very pragmatic Marxist base/superstructure model which lay at the original foundation of much of their work. One consequence of this is a degree of fatalism. Unlike Marx's, Adorno's critique is not connected to any constructive means of redressing the manipulation or deception in which the masses are caught.

A central argument of 'The Culture Industry' concerns the use of popular media to disable individuals' capacity for critical reflection through what might be summed up as a kind of mass-produced distraction,[28] which Adorno goes as far as to describe as 'psychoanalysis in reverse'.[29] In his words, 'the need which might resist central control has already been suppressed by the control of the individual consciousness.'[30] The key point here is that the culture industry has power over individual consciousness not by overcoming diversity of thought through aggressive ideological control or forceful domination, but by managing in the first place to create a situation in which each 'individual' – reproduced as a subject of mass consumption – is essentially alike. This homogenization of individual consciousness also creates in each subject an appetite for more of the same control: 'freedom to choose an ideology – since ideology always reflects economic coercion – everywhere proves to be freedom to choose what is always the same'.[31] All possible modes of thought and consumption are freely permitted in what is ostensibly a liberal society, but the desires of the population are, Adorno argues, subtly, actively and pre-emptively shaped so that the culture industry is then in turn only 'giving the people what they want'.

This is perhaps the kind of dynamic that is at play when James Kelly of *TIME* magazine says that in the question of how to represent the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, he was not influenced by official censorship but was instead left to the freedom of his own liberal 'sensibility', which led him, as it did countless other editors, to conform to a pattern that aligned with prevailing

political convention and intent. In a liberal media environment such as this, as well as communicating visual information, photojournalism also functions precisely to serve the expectations of its audience. It tends to confirm existing ideas rather than introducing new ones and, in a manner that fits precisely with the Adornian model of manipulating individual subjects by 'giving them what they want' within a totalizing framework, reinforces rather than challenges existing beliefs. In other words, news is always presented in relation to things already known. This goes some way towards explaining why the range of photographs was in this instance so narrow, with so little deviation.

There are numerous examples of this kind of reductive logic being played out photographically. One of the most prominent, which lent itself more readily to verbal than visual rhetoric, but was also represented in photographs, was the basic narrative trope of a battle between good and evil. The righteous and morally superior position of the United States was reinforced in images of political leaders, who by means of various gestures and photo opportunities could be seen to step up and offer assurance of retribution. Headlines such as 'President promises to avenge lost lives' and 'Bush vows to respond and calls for calm' were combined with photographs like the one featured in the *Los Angeles Times* on 12 September, of President Bush on the telephone to Vice President Dick Cheney aboard Air Force One, looking capable and determined (Figure 1.4).[32] Other images in support of this same rhetorical message also featured in the *Los Angeles Times* on this date, including one of Bush later in the day, disembarking Air Force One at St. Andrews Air Force Base and addressing the nation from the Oval Office. A photograph of an F-16 fighter en route to Washington, DC, also served to convey the image of a president in control.[33] In his wide-ranging chronicle of the stories behind many of the most well-known September 11th photographs, David Friend suggests that the Air Force One picture was deliberately distributed by the administration to counteract the effect of the earlier photographs and footage of the president at the Florida school where he first learned of the attacks, in which he appears confused, passive and awkward.[34] Ari Fleischer, Bush's then press secretary, explains the effects of the later image:

> On September 11 and the immediate aftermath, the nation did see – whether it was live on TV for extended periods of time or in the snapshot of a photo – a very determined, strong president. That picture caught it. That's one of the reasons that picture resounded so well with the public.[35]

As well as boosting the president's public image, another function of this photograph (also served by the pictures of fighter planes) was to associate the September 11th attacks immediately with war. Bush's declarations to this effect were repeated in many headlines, and the connection extended in some reports to

Figure 1.4 U.S. President George W. Bush speaks to Vice President Dick Cheney by phone aboard Air Force One on 11 September 2001 after departing from Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska. Photo by Eric Draper, The White House/Getty Images.

include the inference that rescue workers at Ground Zero were fulfilling a kind of military duty. At least one article described the firefighters as serving on a 'front line' and went on to say that, on the occasion of Bush's visit captured by Eric Draper in Figure 1.3, they were 'happy to see the Commander in Chief'.[36] The framing of the attacks as an act of war, however, and of the president as a resolute commander preparing to retaliate, was complicated by a simultaneous imperative to convey the opposite image, of emotional sensitivity. This paradox was illustrated by a pair of photographs printed in the *New York Times* on 12 September. One showed a large close-up of Bush in front of the US flag, hands clasped, his expression concerned and reflective, appearing to respond to the situation primarily on the level of its emotional impact. Directly beside this was a smaller photograph of Donald Rumsfeld speaking at the Pentagon. His fist is clenched and raised in a direct, aggressive attitude that contrasts sharply with that of Bush, and the appearance of these images side by side seems to represent a careful balancing act, the two leaders adopting opposite roles that could never have been enacted simultaneously by just one figure.[37]

The open emotion of Bush's demeanour in the days following the attacks was also captured in a famous photograph taken at the Oval Office immediately after his announcement on the telephone to Rudy Giuliani and George Pataki that he had decided to go to New York and visit Ground Zero for himself. The picture, taken by Kevin Lamarque, is a very tightly cropped close-up of the president's face, his mouth strained and eyes glistening with tears. Fleischer, again, expresses satisfaction at this photo opportunity well taken: 'he started to cry at the end of the call. In the classic way that Bush men do, he started to tear up. And there are some wonderful photographs that captured that tear. The press was in the Oval Office for it.'[38] Not everyone saw it as wonderful though. When the picture appeared on the front page of the British *Times*, its caption emphasized further the inner conflict that is visible in the president's face: 'tears well in the eyes of President Bush as he speaks of families and victims during an Oval Office press conference. He said: "I'm a loving guy, and I'm also someone, however, who has a job to do and I intend to do it." '[39] *Los Angeles Times* television critic Howard Rosenberg compared Bush's screen presence during his much-criticized first televised speech to the nation with that of previous presidents Reagan and Clinton: 'throughout this terrible week in US history, Bush has lacked size in front of the camera when he should have been commanding and filling the screen.' Rosenberg picked up in particular on the president's body language ('slinking guiltily'), noting that he appeared like 'a little boy'; genuinely moved, but not strong. 'These are times when America needs a president they can look up to', he concluded, 'not just one who will share in their mourning.'[40] In the *Chicago Tribune*, another reporter described the national White House address as 'thuddingly rote' and complained, 'he had the sentiments right, but this president seems unable to rub sticks together to light a rhetorical fire'.[41] In moments like these, George W. Bush

did not make his press officers' job any easier. But nonetheless, the *New York Times* recorded a significant increase in support for the president during this period. 'Few challenged the national leadership at the time', it reported, 'and one late-night television talk show host who questioned the notion that the airplane hijackers were "cowards" was shunned by sponsors, and rebuked by the White House spokesman.'[42]

While images of the president and other political leaders served to enact the simple narrative themes of war and of goodness in the face of evil, pictures of ordinary citizens present at the scene of the attacks upheld and developed these. The principal figure in this process, depicted in countless photographs and in the texts around them, was the hero. Most strongly associated with firefighters, this title was also extended to rescue workers and other uniformed men, but it continued to proliferate as a rhetorical device that eventually came to encompass victims and survivors. Within the mainstream photographic record, images denoting rescue, help and kindness dominated. Crying or injured people were rarely shown alone, and signs of panic were typically counterbalanced by some positive gesture such as an embrace or an act of practical assistance.[43] Particularly prevalent were photographs of uniformed men coming to the aid of civilian women (Figure 1.5), and strong, physically able people bodily propping up those weakened by shock or injury. It is unsurprising that there should have been so many photographs of this kind: many remarkable rescues and small acts of kindness took place that day in view of the many hundreds of cameras present, and a large number of people could no doubt rightly be commended for extraordinary courage and selflessness. But, the extensive use of the word 'hero', the proliferation of photographs like Jennifer Altman's and the almost total absence of any image of untempered distress or untended suffering created in the media an impression of ubiquitous, self-evident, almost transcendental heroism.[44] In his introduction to *LIFE* magazine's anthology of their coverage of the event, former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani takes the final rhetorical step of ascribing it to all of the victims:

> Even more devastating is the loss of thousands of individuals who were killed in the attack. All were innocent. All were heroes. Those who went to work in the World Trade Center on September 11 were engaged in the quiet heroism of supporting their families, pursuing their dreams, and playing their own meaningful part in a diverse, dynamic and free society.[45]

Among those prepared to question this widespread heroizing was Jürgen Habermas. 'Perhaps the word has different connotations in American English than it does in German', he mused a few weeks after the attacks. 'It seems to me that whenever "heroes" are honoured the question arises as to who needs them and why. Even in this looser sense of the term one can understand Bertolt Brecht's warning: "Pity the land that needs heroes." '[46] Habermas suggests that

Figure 1.5 Woman rescued by emergency personnel after World Trade Center terrorist attack. Photo by Jennifer S. Altman, WireImage/Getty Images.

when the term is used, as it is by Giuliani, to refer to the normal pursuits of work and family life, it is not because such acts are actually heroic, but because the need to delineate the binary of good and evil, of villain and hero, is so great. The 'land needed heroes' at such a senseless time, because it needed a story that made sense.

In some cases, this impulse became explicitly attached to particular photographs, like that of firefighter Mike Kehoe. The famous photograph, taken by John Labriola, of Kehoe looking fleetingly into the camera as he ascends the stairwell of the North Tower while most of its occupants are escaping in the other direction cast him not only as a hero, but a celebrity. 'Everyone wanted a piece of him', wrote Jodie Morse of *TIME* magazine. 'There were 40 messages a day from reporters…One particularly aggressive fan…wrote almost daily on stationary with pink hearts and drove all the way to New York City…just to see him in the flesh.'[47] Going on to receive a 'Pride of Britain' award and appearing in *TIME* magazine's 'Person of the Year' issue, Kehoe was reportedly bemused and distressed at being honoured in this way when so many of his colleagues had been killed. 'Kehoe had not perished', writes David Friend,

> nor had he saved a single life on September 11. But this slight-of-build son and brother of a fire fighter seemed to personify his profession. Unlike hundreds of firemen who were not caught on film that morning…Kehoe was the one who had walked into the lens as if he were minutes from staring death itself in the face. As such, Kehoe became an inadvertent icon, The Fireman in the Stairwell.[48]

The almost hysterical reaction of admirers, politicians and the media to this 'inadvertent' symbol illustrates the need, pointed out by Habermas, for heroes, their stories, their images and ideally their happy endings. It also illustrates the unpredictable power of the camera to shape people's destinies. Kehoe, by his own admission, was cast as the hero not because he did anything remarkable, or even because he survived, but because he happened to be the one caught by the camera.

The distinct but interrelated tropes of good and evil, hero and villain, military honour and leaders who could both empathize and avenge were slotted by the media into pre-existing narrative templates that readers could easily grasp because they were reassuringly familiar. While the unprecedented nature of the attacks and their horrifying originality were evident, journalists and editors responded by emphasizing, through the selection and arrangement of images and the choice of words, how they could be related to reference points from history – like the attack on Pearl Harbor – or to the fictional plotlines of action movies.[49] This formula, in which events are presented as conforming to what viewers and readers apparently already know, thus confirming their existing matrix of

beliefs about the world, often follows catastrophic news events. In John Taylor's words, it necessarily 'arise[s] from the sudden collapse of generally reliable systems', when the known has been undermined.[50] The first question asked in the aftermath of such an event is 'why?', and so, attempts are made early on to impose meaning upon the senselessness. In this case, the restoration of order was enacted in various ways, from the reassuring rhetoric of justice triumphing over evil, to a highlighting of the ways in which particular photographs revealed formal and ideological echoes of images from the past (most famously Thomas Franklin's picture of firefighters raising the flag at Ground Zero with Joe Rosenthal's World War Two Iwo Jima icon). Another means of reconstructing 'reliable systems' was in the use of computer-generated schematic diagrams, or info-graphics. Every major American newspaper featured at least one image of this kind within the first week or so: a clean-lined, sanitized graphic account of the towers' structural damage and collapse, often incorporating a timeline of some kind and giving the impression of a sequence of events that is ordered and clearly apprehensible, with a beginning, a middle and an end.[51]

Having been established, these codes of visual and verbal rhetoric were repeated again and again. Such repetition in the news media of footage and photographs of disasters after their immediate occurrence is not usual. Rather than moving on from 'yesterday's news', papers and magazines were dominated by spectacular photographs of the towers' destruction for weeks, just as the television news sequences had shown the same footage (most commonly the impact of the second plane), on a loop for days. In the next chapter, I will explore the possibility that this repetition caused harm, but Daniel Sherman and Terry Nardin have suggested that it was also implicated in the projection of safety and the restoration of order. The repetition of these images, they argue, reinstated the kind of 'safe spectatorship' that typically characterizes Americans' viewing position in relation to images of atrocity.[52] In short, the images are repeated so many times that they become familiar and are simultaneously consigned to a position of more comfortable distance. Similar to the effect of orderly, tidy and clear schematic diagrams, Sherman and Nardin seem to argue that the device of repetition was used deliberately to lull viewers into a reassuring but false sense of knowledge and control.

As I will later argue, this is questionable. A much clearer consequence of the images' repetition was simply to compound the image overload that broadly characterized the attacks' aftermath. In a formula that corresponds to the culture industry model set out and condemned by Adorno, this overload was not only spectacular, but simplistically homogenized, and it not only suppressed critical reflection and debate, particularly regarding the war in Iraq, but also perpetuated desire for further manipulation by further dazzling, homogenized means. Like (or as) the products of the culture industry, this image spectacle 'impede[d] the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and

decide consciously for themselves'.[53] In 'The Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening', Adorno uses the example of popular music to explain the process of 'regression' imposed upon audiences by the culture industry. Subjects are, he says, 'arrested at the infantile stage' by the homogenization, standardization and fetishization of music. This is not just a dismissive insult to listeners of popular music (whom Adorno believes to be idiots, albeit blameless ones), but rather a judgement of the system in which such listeners are hopelessly caught: 'their primitivism is not that of the undeveloped', he says, 'but that of the forcibly retarded.'[54] There was, I would argue, a similar kind of manipulative 'infantilization' at work on the part of the visual culture industry, and specifically the news media, in the aftermath of September 11th. It is difficult to deny that the spectacular image bombardment that followed the event was shaped to appeal to viewers' emotions rather than to critical thinking. The message conveyed was – rightly, up to a point – one of commemoration, focussing on loss and appealing in various ways to abstracted ideals such as the American spirit. Like Adorno's 'regressive listening', enforced 'regressive seeing' or naïveté in this respect was also facilitated by the promotion of fear, and when these respective messages had been established and driven home through persistent repetition, it was merely the next logical step to present revenge as a foregone conclusion.[55]

In *Afflicted Powers*, their study of the political forces at work in post–September 11th America, four members of the San Francisco-based Retort collective (Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews and Michael Watts) use the ideas of Guy Debord and the Situationists concerning 'the colonization of everyday life', and 'the society of the spectacle' to account for the problems that they see around them, summed up as social control and disintegration. They also argue that the matter of 'mastery in the realm of the image' has not been taken seriously enough in considering the political fallout of September 11th.[56] Guy Debord intended his notion of spectacle to be considered as a new form of, or stage in, the accumulation of capital. For him, this meant the reduction of more and more aspects of human life to the level of the market, and while this was initially understood not to be dependent upon any one mode of representation, it soon became associated above all with the dissemination of images and appearances. The 'colonization of everyday life', meanwhile, suggested the exertion of control over the realm of individual privacy by the dominant culture industry. The goal of Debord's analysis was to try to formulate resistance against these colonizing powers – a goal that somehow seemed possible in the 1960s. Debord was himself primarily concerned with the bearing that this rule of appearances had on politics, specifically state formation and surveillance. In their book, the Retort group revisits Debord's spectacle, stressing that it does not only, as it has come to be misread, refer to disembodied representations, but specifically to the 'exertion of social power'.[57] To quote Debord himself, writing in 1967:

The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images. The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a *weltanschauung* that has been actualised, translated into the material realm – a world view transformed into an objective force.[58]

Retort conclude from this that America is a 'spectacular state' – one in which capital, as Debord forewarned, has accumulated so vastly that it has itself become an image.[59] This is the premise that explains the true implications of the September 11th attacks: the stakes of the 'image-war', America's actions and reactions in its wake and the bankruptcy of its rationale for actual war:

[We are experiencing in the United States] a monstrous political deployment of (and entrapment in) the apparatus of a modern, not to say hyper-modern, production of appearances. Interests and imagery collide … Mistakes or overreach in the management of the image-world have immediate political consequences … and outright defeat in the war of images is something no present-day hegemon can tolerate.[60]

The state's deeper and deeper involvement in this internal culture industry means that it has come to 'live or die by its investment in, and control of, the field of images', now more than ever before.[61] If America is fundamentally a spectacular state, then its response – not only in terms of its subsequent foreign policy (which Retort has scrutinized), but first, and even more fundamentally, in the September 11th attacks' representation by its visual culture industry – can also be called a dazzling mobilization of the spectacular: a world view transformed into an objective force. The overvisibility of certain controlled imagery combined with the invisibility of other views served to deflect public attention onto the sentimental, the redemptive, the aesthetic, the dramatic and the sublime, with the overall effect of disarming genuine political engagement.[62] This is a bold claim to make, but it has its historical precedents; one of which is the American press coverage of the 1991 Gulf War. Elaine Scarry has identified this episode as a case of the deliberate critical disempowerment of the American people by means of the news media. In the process leading up to this conflict, neither of the constitutional requirements for war – a formal declaration of war and the consultation of the population – was met.[63] Because the president effectively acted alone, the people's authority, and therefore their responsibility to other populations, was forfeited, and civic power lost. Scarry details this sequence of events, explaining that it was made possible specifically by inviting the population to perform what she calls a 'mimesis of deliberation', meaning effectively that they were distracted. News audiences were encouraged, for example, to engage in debates about sideline issues of much lesser

importance including the personal affairs of political figures involved in directing the war and the focus tending towards more immediate, trivial or 'exciting' news content.[64] It was unsurprising, Scarry says, that what followed was 'a general inattention to political events', whereby Americans became 'inattentive to the grave subjects that are our actual responsibility to oversee'.[65] 'Inattention' in this instance seemed to mean not a disregard for or disinterest in the military action itself, but in the difficult political questions regarding its justification, efficacy and consequences. By a process of paternalistic distraction, the Gulf War could continue to be ongoing front-page news, seemingly without these issues being addressed at all. Directly recalling Adorno's terms, 'the population', Scarry says, was 'infantilised and marginalized'.

One of the best the diversionary news stories of the Gulf War period was the imagery of the war itself. Dazzling, mesmerizing and most importantly, entertaining, the extraordinarily hi-tech video-game-like spectacle presented on the nightly news ensured that Americans watched in 'fascinated immobility', but actual loss of life was not part of the story. Debord warned that when this kind of diversionary spectacle becomes the news, populations lose both sight and ownership of political responsibility because 'all that was once directly lived has become mere representation'.[66] Seeming to offer a warning to post–September 11th America six years in advance, Scarry concludes: 'when the government commits itself to theatrical spectacle, the possibility of opposition disappears and dissent becomes impossible.'[67] The suspension of critical engagement with issues of foreign policy, domestic human rights and war in early twenty-first-century America was not a product of deflection or distraction towards more trivial issues (this would have been impossible), but of the overplaying, through photographs, of the in-built spectacle of the September 11th attack itself. The deflection of emphasis was towards an exclusively visual and emotional understanding of the event. 'The problem', in the words of Susan Sontag, 'is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs', and this inevitably 'eclipses other forms of understanding, and remembering.'[68]

The same *New York Times* article that noted a sharp increase in support for the president in the aftermath of September 11th went on to report that, on October 25th 2001, the House of Representatives and the Senate voted overwhelmingly to grant the government sweeping new powers to 'root out terrorism' with a bill that allowed immigrants to be held without charge and citizens' privacy breached in unprecedented ways.[69] The terrorists' actions had enabled George W. Bush to unite the United States behind him, quieting questions about the legitimacy of his presidency, and to reinforce a political and military sensibility that claimed a moral obligation to police the world. Instead of reflection in the face of America's vulnerability, the administration sought to turn all thoughts to revenge. Distress was channelled in support of political and military interests,

and a path was cleared for war. Putting it even more forcefully, the Retort group concludes that 'unanswerable lies have succeeded in eliminating public opinion'.[70] Again, they cite Debord:

> once one controls the mechanism which operates the only form of social verification to be universally recognised, one can say what one likes... Spectacular power can similarly deny whatever it wishes to, once, or three times over, and change the subject: knowing full well there is no danger of riposte, in its own space or any other.[71]

Research into public opinion carried out during the Gulf War gives a clue as to why no riposte emerged to the denials or distractions surrounding that conflict. It seems that, presumably because the reality was so unpleasant or unsettling, many Americans were content to be mesmerized by the mysterious pictures.[72] 'Most people did not want to reason about the war'; John Taylor writes, 'they wanted to be numbed, and have responsibility taken from them. Giving up on reason and embracing generalised national hopes and desires is central to patriotism; it helps war leaders to stir up enthusiasm in the population and disguises or dismisses the dangers'.[73] The post–September 11th spectacle provided the US government with both a public distraction from the impending loss of life in Iraq, if not that which had already taken place at Ground Zero, and a cue for a huge, nationwide surge in patriotism. Michelle Fine wrote at that time of 'the long reach of ideology bleeding into conscious and unconscious thought and talk. You can't be in New York, New Jersey, the United States without hearing personal testimonies wrapped in thickly accepted nationalist discourse'.[74] Implicit in this discourse was, it seems, a tacit un-questioning, just as the *New York Times* had reported the judgement faced by those who dared to question the choices of the president or the reasoning behind the attacks themselves. But, such questions, in public discourse at least, were not raised often, because they had already been so effectively choked by the deluge of simplifying photographs and rhetoric. Among the most seriously oversimplified concepts, as Jacques Derrida has pointed out, was terrorism itself. 'Politically speaking', he noted in the very earliest days following the attacks, 'the more slippery a concept, the easier it is to appropriate it opportunistically... the most powerful and destructive appropriation of terrorism is precisely its use as a self-evident concept by all the parties involved'.[75]

Perhaps the most direct and forceful intervention in the public's interpretation of the September 11th attacks by the US government was *After September 11: Images from Ground Zero*; a touring exhibition of photographs presented by the US Department of State and Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, launched in February 2004. Twenty-two sets of prints by photographer Joel Meyerowitz toured 135 venues in sixty-four countries, including the Afghanistan National Art Gallery in Kabul. The photographs were selected by the Department of

State to show 'the true human and physical dimensions' of the attacks' aftermath.[76] Meyerowitz's work is the only existing photographic record of the Ground Zero clean-up site. Almost immediately after the collapse of the towers, the area was fenced off, classified as a crime scene and closed to all photographers, until, with sponsorship from the Museum of the State of New York, Meyerowitz succeeded in gaining access on 13 September. Already an award-winning photographer with a record of solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Art and others outside the United States, Meyerowitz has been most celebrated as a photographer of street life and landscapes, and for his early pioneering use of colour in both genres. History will likely show, however, that the Ground Zero archive is the work for which he will be most remembered by the American public.

He introduces *Aftermath*, the publication that followed this project, by saying, 'I saw what I needed to do. To me, no photographs meant no history. I decided at that moment that I would find my way in and make an archive for the City of New York.'[77] Clearly understanding his task in terms of national record and commemoration, Meyerowitz describes himself as being influenced by the state-commissioned documentary photographers of the Farm Security Administration in the 1920s, which was both nationally significant and 'socially useful'.[78] True to this intention, his huge archive of Ground Zero images is now a freely accessible digital resource held at the Museum of the City of New York. In a second historical comparison, he also likens himself to Mathew Brady, another celebrated photographer of his day who, with the express blessing of the Lincoln administration, famously gained access to photograph the Union encampments and battlefields of the American Civil War. This comparison is, for Meyerowitz, seemingly based upon a notion of the photographer's responsibility to record catastrophic national events and to both shape and safeguard 'public memory'.[79]

In 1985, Alan Trachtenberg called the American Civil War 'the first significant crisis in modern history to occur within the memorializing gaze of a camera', writing that it represented, specifically in Brady's work, the first case of widely accepted 'historicism-by-photography, [the] notion that historical knowledge declares its true value by its photographability'.[80] This he also defines as the 'historicizing ideology' of photography. It could be said, borrowing Trachtenberg's words, that the September 11th attacks were the first significant crisis in modern history to occur *for* the memorializing gaze of the camera, and that its inherent and intentional photographability gave it more power than would otherwise have been imaginable. Along with many others who photographed the event and its aftermath, Meyerowitz expresses a belief in the 'historicizing-by-photography' that Trachtenberg attributes to photographers and audiences of the nineteenth

century, showing that this acceptance of photography's role in the shaping of public memory has almost as long a history as photography itself. His efforts to win access and his subsequent toiling for nine months to create an archive that he saw as his national duty fit Meyerowitz, like Brady before him, into what might be called an American tradition of the national hero photographer. Journalism has long required the creation of star witnesses: brave, skilled and privileged in their access to conflict and catastrophe, whether promoted by the patronage of figures in authority, or (even better) working alone as unilateral renegades in pursuit of the truth. With comparable status to those engaged in combat or rescue operations, but on a uniquely reified level, these photographers are immersed in the action, and yet transcend it. As specialized witnesses, they are endowed not only with bravery but with the prestigious autonomy of the artist. *LIFE* magazine's commemorative book, titled *One Nation: America Remembers September 11, 2001*, compiling highlights of its own coverage of the period following September 11th, features a ten-page section devoted to James Nachtwey, one such celebrated figure. Nachtwey is well known as a war photographer, and the *LIFE* profile shows how this almost mythic prestige was transferred onto the task of photographing the 2001 attacks:

> You might say that he travels the globe as a professional photographer – perhaps the world's preeminent chronicler of war – but Nachtwey feels he goes as a witness … So he's never home, but he is always in the right place at the right time to record eerily beautiful images of violence and injustice … Nachtwey is regularly moved by what he sees, but while he lets emotion dictate which scene might be effective – which picture is most worth taking – he never lets it disrupt the task in hand. He worked through the day until it was dark, at times dodging debris, constantly piecing together the story.[81]

Again, the photographer is a warrior in a war zone. And again, this star status seems to come with a view, not least in the photographer's own mind, of his work as having real national significance for posterity. Confirming Trachtenberg's remarks about the accepted historicizing value of photography, Nachtwey reminisces that 'I started to think the pictures would serve to document a crucial historical watershed'.[82]

In times of particular crisis, it seems that the association of photography with courageous action does not apply only to privileged 'hero photographers', it was also a startlingly automatic one for ordinary members of the public caught up in the attack on the World Trade Center. In numerous eyewitness accounts, running to the scene with a camera was described in the same terms as running there with a first-aid kit or a shovel. One contributor to the *September 11 Photo*

Project, an exhibition of vernacular photographic memorials staged in Manhattan shortly after the attacks, recalls his immediate reaction to news: 'rather than watch from the safety of my window, I grabbed my camera and headed to the street'.[83] Another writes, 'I am a nurse and I knew I had to go there. I rollerbladed four miles downtown to the WTC with my medical kit and camera.'[84] Meyerowitz himself, whose photographic project carried the same sense of urgency as these amateur photographers but with the added weight of his official sanction and his pre-existing creative eminence, says of his project:

> It is a privilege to work at Ground Zero. Everyone who works there has been transformed by the spirituality of the place. The camaraderie among the workers in the zone reminds me of the stories we've heard about the World Wars, where men and women are thrown together by a common cause, share tragedies and victories, and are forever bound to one another by their effort.[85]

Again, taking pictures is equated naturally with helping in the rescue effort. A publicity portrait taken by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders shows Meyerowitz in the midst of 'the zone', looking intently at the viewer, holding his huge mahogany box camera and folded tripod casually over his shoulder in the same manner as a clean-up worker might sling his shovel on a break from digging (or a soldier his rifle). Heroism, and specifically the comparison with warfare, became a standard way of valorizing not just the military action that followed the attacks, but the very work of cleaning up the rubble. Here, the photographer claims this same mantle of military heroism for himself, elevating it even further by virtue of his artistic gift, his sophisticated photographic paraphernalia and his patriotic rhetoric.

An obvious difference between Mathew Brady's record and Meyerowitz's is that, unlike *Aftermath*, in Brady's photographs (most of which were actually taken by a team of lesser-known photographers under Brady's direction, including Timothy H. O'Sullivan) we are confronted with visible human remains, most famously in an image of the fallen at Gettysburg which came to be titled, 'A Harvest of Death' (Figure 1.6). Despite claims in the exhibition's companion publication that Meyerowitz's collection of photographs illustrates the event's human dimensions, the only direct acknowledgement of the loss of life is a single picture captioned, 'Bringing Out the Dead': a floodlit nocturnal scene in which a group of workers carry some recovered remains, the only visible sign of which is a corner of the flag in which they are draped. The rest is darkness. Almost every photograph is centred around firefighters, rescue workers and the ethereal ruins of the destroyed twin towers. Whereas in Meyerowitz's photographs there is only architectural destruction to signify loss of life, Brady shows the aftermath of battle in open fields where there was no falling rubble to obscure the dead. On seeing these photographs in 1863, Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote of an impulse to 'bury them in the recesses

Negative by T. H. O'SULLIVAN.   Entered according to act of Congress, in the year 1865, by A. GARDNER, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the District of Columbia.   Positive by A. GARDNER, 511 7th St., Washington.

Incidents of the War.

A HARVEST OF DEATH.

Gettysburg, July, 1863.

Figure 1.6 'Incidents of the War. A Harvest of Death', Gettysburg, July 1863. Photo by Timothy H. O'Sullivan. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Civil War Photographs [LC-B8184-7964-A].

of our cabinet as we would have buried the mutilated remains of the dead they too visibly represented'.[86] Burying is an important concept here. In his *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes examines the modern Western tendency to bury death and quickly hide it from consciousness by hiding it from view.[87] Perhaps if the bodies of September 11th victims had been made visible to the public, the response would have been similarly to 'bury' and banish them instead of holding the photographic record in such prominence. Seemingly much less squeamish than modern audiences, viewers flocked to see Brady's pictures of human destruction and paid money for them. However grim, the corpses in these photographs remained easier to confront than slavery, the primary cause of the conflict that was behind them. Again, parallels can be drawn with the truths effaced by celebrated photographs of September 11th. The notion that America's own foreign policies, particularly in the Middle East, might, however indirectly, have led to this destruction is much more complicated and unattractive than Meyerowitz's magnificent account. One reviewer of *Aftermath* writes:

> Meyerowitz doesn't resort to the heart wrenching, the lachrymose, the obvious, the stuff of Eyewitness News … Both the pictures and the text are understated, avoiding too the mawkish sentimentality that has come to define our collective public recollection of the fall and its physical and emotional aftermath … Thankfully, Meyerowitz's purpose bears none of the shameless opportunism of politicians, the tabloids and local TV news. None of what novelist Philip Roth controversially called the 'kitschification of 3,000 peoples' deaths.' You'll find no hero worship in *Aftermath*, though there are plenty of heroes present.[88]

As an accomplished landscape photographer, Meyerowitz succeeds in making the collapsed towers appear as ancient ruins, monumental in scale and significance. Of course, they also claim monumental characteristics in a different sense: the book's promotional material describes the work as 'an elegy to the thousands who lost their lives'.[89] These are photographic monuments as well as monumental photographs. And as well as the epic depiction of space, Meyerowitz's characteristic landscape style also has a bearing on the images' capturing of time, which is well suited to their ideological inference. In a deeply critical indictment of the work, which he has no qualms about calling propaganda, Liam Kennedy has argued that the 'gravitas' of these images is achieved in part because Meyerowitz captures 'extended moments rather than decisive moments', which invites empathetic contemplation as the only response.[90] This is not the frozen snapshot style that by necessity characterizes so many other photographs of the 'action' of September 11th, but a controlled, stable depiction of the sustained passage of time in a single frame. There is no chaos here, no elusive meaning. Meaning appears stable, steady and easily grasped.

Though framed as the only documentary record of the clean-up operation, the photographs have less in common with the American documentary tradition than they do with history painting, and specifically in several cases, scenes of the sublime drama of the sea. One image, 'Welders in South Tower' is a wide-angle nocturnal scene showing a small group of metalworkers amongst the very last standing remnants of the building. Rising above the horizon of the pit's boundary the surrounding buildings are cast in deep black-blues and greens, against which the welders' fire is tiny but brilliant. In many of his pictures, the photographer makes atmospheric use of rising smoke, steam or spray from fire-hoses. In this image, steam or smoke – it could be either – catches the light and picks out architectural details, both highlighting and obscuring, like a watercolour wash, or sea-spray. It creates a plane of its own amongst the other receding layers in the image, all of which are in perfect focus and redolent with textural detail. The human figures are somewhere in the middle distance, both dwarfed and anchored by the hot halo of their work, which seems to keep them from drowning in the expanse of twisted rubble that encroaches on them in dark waves. This picture above all evokes the shipwrecks, storms and naval battles of J.M.W. Turner, in which man struggles in noble contention with the sublime power of the elements.[91] It makes sense that these photographs should find their historical reference point not in the fleeting here-and-now of documentary photography but the paintings of Turner and the Romantics: an art of transcendence, mythic hubris and eternal truths. Meyerowitz says that his goal 'was not to make "pretty" pictures of the destruction but to record – with meticulous archival precision – what happened … it was not about making Art,' though he does admit that many of the images 'revealed an accidental beauty'.[92] Some have dared to describe the act of terrorism at the World Trade Center as 'the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos' (Karlheinz Stockhausen), and the perpetrators as 'brilliant' (Norman Mailer) and 'death artists' (Jonathan Franzen).[93] After the spectacle of the attack had passed, the site was not beautiful. It was a mass graveyard. Many images of the area, made by professional photographers like Gilles Peress and Susan Meiselas, as well as the majesterial ruins of Joel Meyerowitz, are formally beautiful, though it has seemed sacrilegious to say so (and so they are called surreal). The photographic artistry that can transform the horrific and the unseeable in these scenes is part of the commercial appeal of commemorative publications like *Aftermath* and *LIFE*'s *One Nation* book.

The *After September 11* exhibition was presented as a kind of corrective, intended to reveal to audiences around the world the unmediated reality of what Americans had been through, and the accompanying catalogue publication seemed designed to instruct audiences in how to react. Alongside reproductions of Meyerowitz's photographs, the catalogue features many images of people, including some who had participated in the clean-up, looking at the exhibition at its various locations, contemplating the pictures alone or in groups. In the same

vein as photographs of politicians surveying the scene itself, this seems to be a paternalistic lesson in how to look. Though not strictly what Adorno had in mind, here is the culture industry's infantilizing agenda: a symbolic intervention in the processes of witnessing and understanding. But, the overriding problem with this exhibition was much more urgent than the question of how much visual trauma viewers could tolerate, or exactly what they saw. At its launch event, the secretary of state made a speech that betrayed a startling leap from the grief invoked by these photographs, to military retaliation:

> September eleventh was a very personal experience for each of us. Each of us remembers where we were when we first learned of the attacks. Each of us remembers our initial chilling impressions and our response. These images remind me that our country, our people and our families are very precious and that we must do all we can to protect them from the scourge of terrorism … It gave us a sense of purpose and vision as a people, showed the world what Americans were made of, and *gave us the opportunity* to lead a worldwide coalition to go after not only the perpetrators of these attacks, but to go after terrorists around the world.[94] (italics added)

In his address at the National Cathedral on 15 September 2001, President Bush made a similar link, telling the congregation, 'our unity is a kinship of grief, and a steadfast resolve to prevail against our enemies. And this unity against terror is now extending across the world'.[95] Again, the causal association between grief and militarism was taken to be a foregone conclusion. Like the photographs, it spoke for itself. The text of the president's National Cathedral address was reproduced in the *After September 11* exhibition catalogue, further cementing the connection between these pictures and war. Identifying Meyerowitz's work as the archetype of what he calls 'late photography', David Campany has argued that such images, as well as being ideal vehicles for mass mourning, can foster 'political withdrawal' precisely because of their profound stillness and silence. The dangerous truism that such imagery speaks for itself can, he says, 'easily flatter the ideological paralysis of those who gaze at it with a lack of social or political will to make sense of its circumstance'.[96] Meyerowitz's photographs were part of a state apparatus that capitalized on this ideological paralysis, and that had the power not only to cement whatever meanings it chose to invest in them, but to underwrite the authority of these meanings and promote them around the world.

The American media's presentation of September 11th can at best be called incomplete in its abundance. While a good deal of writing, discussion and debate did take place in the aftermath of this event, its overwhelming presentation was visual, and specifically photographic, amounting to a spectacle of such force that it paralysed critical dissent. In Adornian terms, this enforced regressive seeing was paradoxically entrenched by the autonomy of the press and the impression

of total, unimpeded visibility. Public engagement was swept aside by 'public memory', and the dazzled, grieving American people forfeited the ability to see, beyond their own borders and the present moment, the deaths to come. As well as in the loss of human life and the material destruction, this attack was a spectacular blow to America within the symbolic economy of spectacle on which the state itself is based. America's leaders knew better than anyone that such an act of image-engineering was itself a piece of statecraft and a devastating political blow. As the Retort group argues, when an image-based state is defeated in the image-world as America was, it is obliged to come up with an answer. And so, the US media struggled, using all the redemptive narratives, emotive plotlines and visual cues at its disposal to try to manage the fallout of its symbolic defeat. Years later, the state is still 'flailing blindly in the face of an image it cannot exorcize, and trying desperately to convert the defeat back into terms it can respond to'.[97] The primary location for this attempted symbolic riposte has been Iraq. But, not only was that campaign a disaster in conventional military terms, it has also, despite the construction of triumphal photo opportunities (the fall of Saddam's statue and Bush's flight-deck victory declaration coming most obviously to mind, both of which were of course countered by the far greater impact of 'the Abu Ghraib photographs'), failed to produce a vision that could reassert America's status in the economy of images. Further, the endless repetition, within its own media machine, of the defeat itself has not only had the effect of undermining the psychological recovery of its population as I will go on to argue, but also of simply reiterating the crushing point again and again. In Retort's words, 'where, in the end, is the image the war machine has been looking for – the one to put paid to the September haunting? … The Towers keep falling.'[98]